Introduction to the Braille Music Code

Overture

I always think the Braille music code is similar to Chess in that it is easy to learn the basic moves (symbols) but it can take a lifetime to master.

There are some who say it is not necessary to read music to be able to transcribe it into braille. However those who have some knowledge of music must have a considerable advantage.

This booklet only contains basic information. You will need to refer to more complete texts e.g. *New International Manual of Braille Music Notation*, for detailed information on format, rules, complete set of signs etc.

Remember, it is essential that you analyse and ‘mark’ up your piece of music before you commence transcribing it into braille.

Before you begin there are a few things that need to be clarified.

1. Unlike print music braille music is not written on a staff (lines and spaces, treble clefs etc). The clef signs are not used, the pitch of a note is indicated by octave signs.
2. The main styles of formatting braille music you are likely to need are
   a. single line (instrumental e.g. recorder, tuba, clarinet)
   b. lyrics over notes (songs)
   c. bar-over-bar (piano and scores).
3. There are specific and different formatting/layout rules for instrumental, vocal, piano and percussion music.
4. A bar line is designated by a space.
5. Braille users must understand the concept of intervals long before the concept is introduced to print music users.
6. The order in which the Braille music signs are written is very specific.

Please send any suggestions or corrections to me.

Jacqui Conn
Braille Music Consultant
Disability Services Support Unit
Education Queensland
email: Jacqui.Conn@deta.qld.gov.au
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</table>
Names of the Notes

When using the Braille Music Code the names of Musical Notes should be kept distinct from those of the letter names of the Alphabet of literature.

The seven letters of the MUSICAL ALPHABET are best learnt in the order in which they appear in the scale of C major. The top four dots of the cell, dots 1-2-4-5 (dots 1-2-4-5) are used to give the basic shape of the notes. Note that the bottom dots, dots 3 and 6, of the six dot cell are entirely absent. These are used to designate the time-value of the note.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Music name</th>
<th>Braille Sign</th>
<th>Alphabet name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>dots 1-2-4-5</td>
<td>d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>dots 2-3-5</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>dots 1-2-3-4</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>dots 1-3-4-5</td>
<td>g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>dots 1-3-5</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>dots 2-3-4</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>dots 3-4-5</td>
<td>j</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above Braille signs are examples of the notes written as quavers (\(\frac{1}{4}\)).

Try to always connect the representation of the music note with the true sound of the note and its Braille representation.

When talking about C crotchet, try using terminology such as dots 145 with dot 6, or say ‘doh’ crotchet. Call C a semibreve as dots 145-36. This way, dots 145 will always be identified with music note C. Reading braille music seems to be easier once the student realizes that the bottom time value dots have nothing to do with the name of the note. To possibly reduce the confusion it has been suggested to try teaching the notes as doh, re, me, fa, soh etc or the scale step number 1,2,3 etc instead of the letter names. (The ‘doh, re, me’ method will not work if the music teacher at your school is using the Kodaly Method.)
**Time-Value of Notes**

The time-value is written in the same cell as the note, being indicated by the presence or absence of both or either the bottom dots.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>♪</td>
<td>Quaver</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>†</td>
<td>Crotchet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>†</td>
<td>Minim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♬ or ♬</td>
<td>Semibreve /</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semiquaver</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A dotted note consists of two cells. The first cell signifies the note name and time value the second cell contains the dot (dot 3 ⚫) C as a dotted crotchet.

\[
\text{♩  =  ♪  ♪}
\]

Braille users will need to know what the crotchet and quaver stems/flags are as sighted music teachers will refer to them using these names. They will not talk about dot 6 for a crotchet or dot 3 for a minim.
Rests

Rests use the same names as the notes and indicate SILENCE values as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>brev</th>
<th>semibreve or whole bar rest</th>
<th>minim rest</th>
<th>crotchet rest</th>
<th>quaver rest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sign</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though it is a good idea to keep the music names distinct from the alphabet letter names you will find that some braille students remember the rests by the letter names and will use the created word MUVX.

Similarly to a dotted note, dot 3 (;) following a rest indicates a dotted rest.

Silence throughout an entire bar is shown by the semibreve rest

Throughout 2 bars

Throughout 3 bars

Throughout 4 or more bars

Notes and Rests Shorter than a Quaver

There still remain shorter time values, each one-sixteenth of the longer values. These are only two of them. I have not included the Hemi-demi-semi and shorter as they will probably not be required in basic music transcription.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Longer Values</th>
<th>Braille and Music Signs</th>
<th>Shorter Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semibreve</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ ✓ ¡  ✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minim</td>
<td>¡ ✓ ¡</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>¡ ¡ ¡ ¡</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eight time-values are therefore used in braille music. There is no chance of confusion as the context indicates almost without exception the correct value of the note or rest.

If it should not be clear a value sign is written before the second note.

Value sign for semibreves etc.  ✓ ✓ :  

Value sign for semiquavers etc.  ¡ ¡ ¡ :  

The four alternative values apply to rests in just the same way.
Pitch of Notes

In printed music the clefs, usually treble and bass, together with the staves (lines and spaces) tell you the pitch of a note. In music braille there are seven pitch signs, each indicating which ‘octave’ a note belongs to, and using the keyboard of a seven-octave pianoforte as the gauge. The lowest C would be called 1st octave C, and each successive C begins a new octave. All notes from any C to and including the B above it belong to the same octave. For instance middle C, being the fourth C up the keyboard, is called 4th octave C, and all the notes from 4th octave C to the B above belong to the 4th octave.

The seven pitch signs use dots 4, 5 and 6 (\(\cdot\)).

1st octave \(\cdot\)
2nd octave \(\cdot\)
3rd octave \(\cdot\)
4th octave \(\cdot\)
5th octave \(\cdot\)
6th octave \(\cdot\)
7th octave \(\cdot\)

Double the 1st octave pitch sign for notes lower \(\cdot\)
Double the 7th octave pitch sign for notes higher \(\cdot\)
Pitch signs are always written close-up before the note and must never be separated from it e.g. 3rd octave C, a crotchet = \(\cdot\)

4th octave C, a minin = \(\cdot\)
Rules for the use of pitch signs when moving from one note to another must be carefully observed:

1. Leaps of seconds and thirds never need pitch signs.
2. Leaps of sixths and wider always need pitch signs.
3. Leaps of fourths and fifths need pitch signs only if skipping to another octave.

I found this De Garmo verse helpful in learning the use of octave marks:

“Never, Always, Only If”

Never mark a second or third;
Always mark a sixth or more;
Fourth or fifth,
Only if
It should leave the octave.

The octave sign is always placed immediately before the note. No other sign ever comes between the octave sign and the note.

The octave sign is always used at the beginning of each line of music.

Accidentals

An accidental is a natural, a flat or a sharp. In braille and print music the accidental is written before a single note to alter its pitch. It is also written before the pitch sign if a pitch sign is to be used for the note concerned. They are easy to remember as they are the first 3 letter signs in order, a, b, c with dot 6.

natural  ♮ ♯
flat    ♭
sharp  ♯

Example.

natural  ♮ ♯
flat    ♭
sharp  ♯

---

Key Signatures
Unlike print music where the key signature is written on every stave in braille music the key signature is written once only (before the time signature). It is usually *centred* above the first line of words or music. But for short examples of single-line music the key/time signatures can be written at the start of the line, followed by a space before the music begins.

If there is a change of key or time, the new signature is written where it occurs with a space on each side. Or it can be written at the start of the next line.

No more than 3 cells are to be used. When there are more than 3 sharps or flats in the key signature the numeral sign is followed by the number and then by the sharp or flat, all close-up.

Key signatures for
- **G Major**
  - ♯
- **D Major**
  - ♯ ♯
- **A Major**
  - ♯ ♯ ♯
- **E Major**
  - ♯ ♯ ♯ ♯
- **F Major**
  - ♭
- **F Minor**
  - ♭ ♭

Time Signatures
The time signature is written like a fraction in maths and follows the key signature without spacing. Normally the time signature is centred above the first line of music or words, after the key signature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Signature</th>
<th>Note</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>♯</td>
<td>Three-four time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>♯♯♯♯</td>
<td>G Major, four-four time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>♭♭♭♭</td>
<td>Common time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The metronome sign is usually written after the indication of the mood of the music e.g. Allegro.

```
Allegro (♩ = 100)
```
Introduction to Braille Music by Jacqui Conn
26 July 2010 - 9

Barlines
A barline is indicated by a space.

A double barline is indicated by the sign

A repeat from the beginning barline is indicated by the sign

The Slur and the Tie
The slur \( \rightarrow \) A slur joins two or more notes of different pitch and often indicates that these notes are sung to one syllable of a word.

The tie \( \rightarrow \) A tie joins two notes of the same pitch.

\( \ddagger \ddagger \)

Chord tie \( \llbracket \) \( \ddagger \ddagger \)

When more than four notes are to be slurred, the sign is doubled after the first note and written again before the last note.

\( \ddagger \ddagger \ddagger \ddagger \ddagger \)

Example of long slur or phrasing –

\( \ddagger \ddagger \ddagger \ddagger \)

Expression Marks
Abbreviated words – Preceded by the “ar” sign these words are written uncontracted and followed by dot 3, \( \ddagger \). The note following must be preceded by its octave sign.

accel. = \( \ddagger \) \( \ddagger \) \( \ddagger \) \( \ddagger \)

rit. = \( \ddagger \) \( \ddagger \) \( \ddagger \) \( \ddagger \) \( \ddagger \)

Letters – Preceded by \( \ddagger \), the “ar” sign, \( \ddagger \) dot 3 follows only if made necessary the presence of dots 1, 2, or 3 in the following cell. The note following must be preceded by its octave sign.

\( p = \ddagger \) \( ff = \ddagger \) crescendo or \( < = \ddagger \) \( p < = \ddagger \)
Complete words and groups of words are preceded by \( \text{word sign} \) and followed by word sign. If they occur during a bar, dot 5 is written before the first space. The note following must be preceded by the octave sign.

The sign for staccato is \( \text{staccato sign} \) can be doubled if affecting 4 or more consecutive signs.

The sign for an accent is \( \text{accent sign} \) can be doubled if affecting 4 or more consecutive signs.

Italian, French or German words used in a print score must be brailled in uncontracted Braille as applies to languages. A term at the beginning of a piece of music, e.g. Allegro is placed on the same line as the key signature and the time signature. These are then centred on a line above the music.

**Intervals**

In braille music an INTERVAL (the distance from one note to another) is written numerically. It is of vital importance that the concept of intervals is known almost from the beginning. The intervals always relate to the first note that is written, not to the previous note of the chord.

This is another instance where often the order of the signs is remembered by a nonsense string of print signs and contractions.

\[ \text{ST, ING, BLE, IN, WAS, CON, COM} \]

The Interval signs are

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interval</th>
<th>Dots</th>
<th>Sign</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2(^{nd}) interval</td>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>ST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3(^{rd}) interval</td>
<td>3-4-6</td>
<td>ING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4(^{th}) interval</td>
<td>3-4-5-6</td>
<td>BLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5(^{th}) interval</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>IN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6(^{th}) interval</td>
<td>3-5-6</td>
<td>WAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7(^{th}) interval</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>CON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8(^{th}) interval (octave)</td>
<td>3-6</td>
<td>COM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) Pre-UEB, but still useful.
1. 4\textsuperscript{th} Octave C, crotchet and 4\textsuperscript{th} Octave F, crotchet to be sounded together: ⏯️ ⏯️

2. The D Major Triad: ⏯️ ⏯️ ⏯️ ⏯️ ⏯️

3. The F Minor Triad ⏯️ ⏯️ ⏯️ ⏯️ ⏯️

In writing piano music (Bar over Bar) the intervals in the Right Hand are read downwards from the highest note (usually the melody) and in the Left Hand read UPWARDS from the lowest note (usually the root of the chord):

↓

Where the same Interval (not changed by means of Accidentals) is shown with Four or MORE successive notes, it may be DOUBLED, by using two signs to indicate the start of the doubling, and one to indicate the end.

Repeats

The braille repeat sign is ⏯️ – dots 2-3,5-6. This device does not apply to the print copy of the music and must be determined by the transcriber.

With one space each side it is used to indicate the repeat of a full (preceding) bar.

���� ⏯️ ⏯️ ⏯️
If a bar is repeated consecutively 3 or more times, only one repeat sign is used, followed immediately by the numeral sign and the appropriate number (showing NUMBER of REPEATS, not how many time the bar occurs.

Without a space before it it is used to repeat part of a bar (when rhythmically correct.)

\[ \text{Repeat Sign} \]

**In single line music**

If a number has a space on each side, repeat the number of bars (repeat previous two bars).

If two numbers are written close up with a space on each side count back the number of bars given first and then repeat the number of bars given second. This device is used only for bars near at hand.

**Print Repeats**

In the print music copy passages to be repeated may be indicated by”

The double-bar preceded by dots, meaning to repeat from the beginning or from a previous double-bar, followed by dots,

The SEGNO (\( \text{\circle{-}} \)) and DA CAPO. The Segno sign marks the beginning of a Segno passage and may be followed by (a), (b) etc. to indicate the number of the Segno section. The end of the section is marked by the sign “CH” (dots 1-6).

The Segno sign (with its appropriate number where applicable), preceded by dot 5, indicates the point at which the particular segno section should be repeated. Thus: dot 5, dot 1 etc.

The DA CAPO, written D.C. means to repeat to the sign, (dots 1-6), \( \text{:\(:} \).

**String Instrument Signs**

**Fingering**

1\textsuperscript{st} finger: Dot 1  
2\textsuperscript{nd} finger: Dot 1-2  
3\textsuperscript{rd} finger: Dot 1-2-3  
4\textsuperscript{th} finger: Dot 2  
Open string: Dot 1-3  
Thumb: Dots 1-6,1-3
**Bowing or Plectrum**

For BOWED Instruments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bowing Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Down bow</td>
<td>dots 1-2-6,1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up bow</td>
<td>dots 1-2-6,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Arco**

Pizzicato RH | usually written as Pizz.

**Open String**

For PLUCKED Instruments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stroke Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Down stroke</td>
<td>dots 1-2-6,1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up stroke</td>
<td>dots 1-2-6,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**String Signs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>String</th>
<th>Dots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1-4-6,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1-4-6,1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1-4-6,1-2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1-4-6,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1-4-6,1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1-4-6,2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1-4-6,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Positions and Frets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Dots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3-4-5,3-4-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3-4-5,3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3-4-5,3-4-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3-4-5,3-4-5-6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5th Position  Dots 3-4,5,3-5
6th Position  Dots 3-4,5,3-5,6
7th Position  Dots 6,3-4,5,2-5
8th Position  Dots 3-4,5,3-6
9th Position  Dots 3-4,5,3-6,3-4
10th Position Dots 3-4,5,3-6,3-4,6
11th Position Dots 3-4,5,3-6,3-4-5-6
12th Position Dots 3-4,5,3-4-5,3-4

Wind Instrument Signs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Half breath</th>
<th>Full breath</th>
<th>Add mute</th>
<th>Remove mute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>// or (✓)</td>
<td>, or ✓</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can vary in print</td>
<td>can vary in print</td>
<td>over or under note</td>
<td>over or under note</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Music Hyphen

The music hyphen, dot 5, is used to interrupt a bar at a rhythmic point where that bar cannot be completed on that line. Use with great care.

The Music Prefix

Music Prefix  6,3  (2 cells)

Literary Prefix  56, 23  (2 cells)

Hand Signs for Piano

Right Hand Sign  ✓ ✓ ✓
Left Hand Sign  ✓ ✓
**Fingering**

There are five fingering signs using dots 1,2,3. They basically follow the same pattern as the octave signs.

1\textsuperscript{st} finger \Pdot1
2\textsuperscript{nd} finger \Pdot2\Pdot4\Pdot2
3\textsuperscript{rd} finger \Pdot3\Pdot4\Pdot3
4\textsuperscript{th} finger \Pdot2\Pdot2
5\textsuperscript{th} finger \Pdot3\Pdot3

The fingering signs are written close up after the note. (The pitch signs are written close up before the note.)

\Pdot4\Pdot4 /\Pdot4\Pdot4 /\Pdot1\Pdot5\Pdot2\Pdot34 /\Pdot2\Pdot34 /\Pdot2\Pdot34 /\Pdot2\Pdot34

To indicate alternate fingerings for one note, the two fingerings are written close up after the note.

\Pdot4\Pdot4 /\Pdot4\Pdot4 /\Pdot1\Pdot2\Pdot34 /\Pdot2\Pdot34 /\Pdot2\Pdot34 /\Pdot2\Pdot34

To indicate a change of finger on a note, the two signs are separated by a music slur immediately after the note.

\Pdot4\Pdot4 /\Pdot4\Pdot4 /\Pdot1\Pdot2\Pdot34 /\Pdot2\Pdot34 /\Pdot2\Pdot34 /\Pdot2\Pdot34

**Clef Signs**

Clef signs are not normally used in braille music as the pitch/octave signs gives the pitch to the notes. However it useful for Braille users to know these signs in case they are needed.

\textbf{G Clef, treble.} Uses the interval sign for a 2\textsuperscript{nd} as the print treble clef is based around the 2\textsuperscript{nd} line.

\textbf{F Clef, bass.} Uses the interval sign for a 4\textsuperscript{th} as the print bass clef is based around the 4\textsuperscript{th} line.

\textbf{C Clef, tenor (used often for viola).} Uses the interval sign for a 3\textsuperscript{rd} as the print treble clef is based around the 3\textsuperscript{rd} line.
Grouping of Notes Shorter than a Quaver
In braille music all notes shorter than a quaver can be grouped provided –

a) Each group represents a beat
b) Each note is of equal value
c) The beat grouped within a bar in not followed by a quaver.

Examples

A rest may begin a group.

Rules for Doubling
The ‘doubling rule’ may be applied to save space and to cause fewer interruptions to note reading.

a) When five or more consecutive notes are joined by a Slur or Long Phrase.
b) Where the same interval is shown with four or more consecutive notes, and
c) When four or more consecutive notes are shown with symbols of execution or expression (Accent and Staccato)

The particular sign is written twice at the beginning and once again before the final note of the passage.
Bar-over-bar Format

Here is an example of a few bars at the start of a piano piece in Bar-over-Bar format. Each bar begins with an Octave sign, however, many transcribers choose not to repeat Octave or Pitch signs at the beginning of each new bar, except when quite necessary. However, they should be placed at the beginning of any new line of music.
Resources
BRL: Braille through Remote Learning
http://www.brl.org/codes/session09/overview.html

Read, Sing and Play, by Ian Cooper and Roma Dix available from loan from the Alternate Library, Disability Services Support Unit. It has also been made available, free of charge by Roma Dix, from Vision Australia. http://www.visionaustralia.org.au


New International Manual of Braille Music Notation, also available at Opus Technologies also available on CD-ROM.

If you want to learn how to transcribe printed music into braille, get Introduction to Braille Music Transcription by Mary Turner De Garmo (Library of Congress, Washington, 1974, 281 pages), the text used by those studying to become certified music braille transcribers in the U.S. It gives detailed transcribing lessons and has lots of examples and exercises. The De Garmo, in print and braille can be downloaded (gratis) from http://www.loc.gov/nls/music/ under Music Transcribing Manuals

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Further revisions and additions by Jacqui Conn, Low Incidence Unit – Vision Impairment Services, 17 Churchill St, Buranda QLD 4102, March 2002 and Disability Services Support Unit (DSSU) July 2010.